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Editor’s Introduction: Fictionary

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Introduction to the current issue, including editor’s picks. Peterson examines “terminological trickiness” and lexical games, particularly as A. A. Howsepian employs them in a recent article in the distinguished journal *Religious Studies.*
Editor’s Introduction: Fictionary

Daniel C. Peterson

I have been much occupied, over the past few years, with the contemplation of what I have called “lexical polemics” or “lexical imperialism”—the attempted use of verbal legerdemain, in the obvious absence of rigorous analysis and substantial evidence, to win an argument. Indeed, the book Offenders for a Word: How Anti-Mormons Play Word Games to Attack the Latter-day Saints takes the evaluation of such maneuvers as its central theme. The basic tool of “lexical imperialism” is the redefinition of a term in order to defeat one’s chosen enemy by excluding him or her from a desirable group or category by sheer verbal fiat.

In 1996, a particularly egregious example of such terminological trickiness appeared in a very unexpected place, the distinguished journal Religious Studies, published by Cambridge University Press. In an article entitled “Are Mormons Theists?” A. A. Howseopian, someone linked with the department of psychiatry at a veterans hospital in Fresno, California, argued that, since the God worshiped by the Latter-day Saints is not identical with the God-concept associated with St. Anselm of Canterbury (d. 1109 A.D.), he is not really divine at all and “in spite of initial appearances Mormons are, in fact, atheists.” It is a breathtakingly audacious claim.

1 See Daniel C. Peterson and Stephen D. Ricks, Offenders for a Word: How Anti-Mormons Play Word Games to Attack the Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City: Aspen Books, 1992). Offenders for a Word has recently been reissued by FARMS.

St. Anselm is most famous for what has been known, since the days of Immanuel Kant (who rejected it), as the “ontological argument” for the existence of God, which appears in the second part of his Proslogion, or “Discourse.” It is an argument based entirely upon the word God or, perhaps more precisely, upon the concept behind the word. It is wholly uninterested in examining evidence from what most people would recognize as “the real world.” (For all its venerability and undeniable philosophical interest, therefore, one can certainly see how the ontological argument might appeal to someone prone to terminological games.) St. Anselm defined God as “something than which nothing greater can be conceived” (aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari potest). Then he argued that, since a thing that exists in reality is greater than a thing that exists only in the mind, God must exist in reality. For if God existed only in the mind, he would not be “something than which nothing greater can be conceived” and we would be able to imagine something greater—namely a God having all the characteristics of the imagined one but with the considerable further advantage of actual existence.

It is clearly this Anselmian definition of God that Howsepiian had in mind. Since Latter-day Saints believe in a God who is bounded within a physical body, who may well be a father’s son, who functions within a universe of co-eternal intelligences and co-existent matter and apparently works within natural laws as well as the rules of logic, it takes little effort to show that he is, at the most, not wholly Anselmian. But that, for Howsepiian, demonstrates that he is not divine at all. Within about a year of the appearance of Howsepiian’s article, the Latter-day Saint attorney and philosopher Blake Ostler published a quite creditable critique of it in the same journal, and I commend that critique to those who might be interested in pursuing the subject further.3 I would nevertheless like to offer a few comments on the article myself. And, as the editor of the present Review, aliquid quo (in this realm, and at least in my own mind) nihil maius cogitari potest, who can stop me?

I will admit that my first reaction to Howsepiian’s article was a somewhat angry one. The piece is clever, but fundamentally and, I

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think, obviously wrong-headed. Indeed, maliciously wrong-headed. Not only do I find it sophistic—sophomoric struck me initially as the more appropriate, and etymologically more precise, term—but I think its anti-Mormon motivation, though evidently sufficiently well hidden to get past the (perhaps naïve) editors of Religious Studies, manifests itself in unmistakable ways.

For example, Howsepian’s comments on the Virgin Birth of Christ and his complacent certainty that Latter-day Saint teaching on the subject contradicts the Bible (p. 359, note 6) come right out of standard evangelical Protestant criticism of the church. One can scarcely be surprised at this, though, since (on p. 357, note 2) he has already cited the late anti-Mormon impresario “Dr.” Walter R. Martin as one of his scholarly sources. And there are the catty little comments that show up at various places. Consider, for instance, Howsepian’s definition of “the ideal marriage” in Mormonism as “the marriage of one man to at least two women for time and eternity” (p. 370; emphasis deleted). Or his explanation (also on p. 370; emphasis deleted) that “Mormons are taught that they ought to marry for eternity but that they ought not remain worshipfully faithful to the Godhead for eternity.” This latter item picks up the charge, not uncommon in more sophisticated anti-Mormon circles, that, while Latter-day Saints deify the family, they humanize and thus devalue the deity. But can anybody recall any leader in the church ever teaching, explicitly or by implication, that we “ought not remain worshipfully faithful to the Godhead for eternity”?

And when (on p. 361) Howsepian wants to account for the alleged discrepancy between the appearance the Mormons give of worshiping deities and the supposed fact that they do not, he offers as a first explanation that “Mormons have been intentionally deceptive about what their actual theological beliefs are.” This is, of course, a staple accusation of anti-Mormon agitators. Careful readers of his essay will note that Howsepian does not rule out the possibility of systematic, deliberate Mormon deception; he simply lets the implication of bad faith linger in the minds of his readers.

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4 On “Dr.” Martin’s astonishing career as a (still influential!) religious mountebank and entrepreneur, see Robert L. Brown and Rosemary Brown, They Lie in Wait to Deceive, vol. 3 (Mesa, Ariz.: Brownsworth, 1986).
“I shall,” he chastely writes, “say nothing more about the first of these alternatives.”

Most troubling of all, I think, is Howsepián’s repeated use of the words *atheism* and *atheist(s)*—terminology, of course, that is at the very heart of his argument. (See, for example, pp. 357, 361, 365, 367.) His hostile attitude toward the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and its teachings is more than implicit. I cannot imagine that such terms, and the charge itself—much like the accusation that Latter-day Saints are non-Christian cultists—were not chosen for their explosive, damning, and maximally damaging character. Indeed (on pp. 364–65, having laid the groundwork on pp. 360–61), Howsepián stresses his accusation that Latter-day Saints do not merely fail to believe in his One Authorized View of God, but consciously reject it. But readers must guard against such sleight of hand. It is Howsepián, and Howsepián alone, who has conjured up what he calls (on p. 368) “the problem of Mormon atheism.”

The crux of Howsepián’s argument, and the point to which my response will be primarily directed, is clearly his restrictive definition of the term *God*. He says that “no entity countenanced as being a God by the LDS Church, given any plausible characterization of the concept of deity, qualifies as being a genuine God” (on p. 361, emphasis altered). It turns out, though, that the only “plausible characterization of the concept of deity” that Howsepián allows is an Anselmian one. This, in my opinion, is unashamed lexicographical imperialism.

Howsepián continually tries to hold Latter-day Saints to Anselmian theories or even to mainstream understandings of certain theological concepts—understandings that they would not accept—the better to beat them with. For instance, having cited

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5 There are other things, simple errors, that do not really affect Howsepián’s argument one way or the other. One example is his explanation that, for Latter-day Saints, “God the Father was once an unexalted man named Elohim” (p. 359). His identification of the late Elder Bruce R. McConkie as a member of the (long defunct) First Council of the Seventy may say something about his level of current knowledge of Mormonism and/or his direct familiarity with primary sources. (I strongly suspect that Walter Martin is his source for the materials he quotes from not only Elder McConkie but Brigham Young, Wilford Woodruff, and the like.) And his notion that Elder McConkie was speaking, or could speak, “for the whole LDS Church” (p. 361) is certainly questionable.
Brigham Young about eternal progression (on p. 361), he remarks that, "of course, on any standard understanding of finitude of being this is metaphysically impossible." But Brigham Young almost certainly did not have in mind any such thing as a "standard understanding of finitude of being." (More precisely, I suspect, he was using a nonstandard understanding of the word *infinite*—one that perhaps would not even pass philosophical muster as genuinely "infinite," but that does nonetheless convey certain important religious ideas.) Howsebian declares that

there is, in theological contexts, good reason to identify an *infinite* being with an Anselmian perfect being, i.e. with a being than which no greater is possible. The principal intuition at work here is that an *infinite* personal being can have no (non-logical) limitations of any sort; such a being is *maximally* or *unsurpassably* great; or, in other words, the *greatest possible being* (p. 362; emphasis in the original).

Since, however, Howsebian has failed to demonstrate that either Brigham Young in particular or the Latter-day Saints in general care about such a God, or aspire to believe in one, his personal Anselmian musings about God have no apparent relevance to Mormonism. He seems, in fact, as he proceeds, to be committing something like the classic fallacy of equivocation, where the success of an argument depends upon a surreptitious or unconscious shift in a word's meaning between its occurrence in the premises and its occurrence in the conclusion.

Besides, Howsebian’s attempted ideological landgrab would wreak havoc with ordinary and scholarly understandings of both history and world religions. On the definition that he permits for the term *God*, the Romans, the Greeks, the Norse and the Germanic tribes, the Maya, the Aztecs, the Babylonians, the Canaanites, and the ancient Egyptians were all atheists. All or most Hindus and Buddhists would have to be considered atheists, as well. This finding would, to put it mildly, force us to rewrite virtually every book ever written on ancient history, comparative religions, and the like. Process theology, too, would arbitrarily be redefined as atheistic.
The ironies involved in Howsepián’s lexical transmogrification are remarkable: For example, in antiquity, Socrates, the Jews, and the early Christians were accused of atheism, largely because they did not believe in the usual gods of Greece and Rome. The well-known University of Toronto Egyptologist Donald Redford says that “the Egyptians, when eventually confronted by the faceless, unidentifiable, vindictive Judeo-Christian God, rejected him and declared the religiosity—or irreligiosity—of his fanatical followers atheism.” However, if one accepts the position of A. A. Howsepián, Socrates and the Jews and the early Christians would have been atheists if they had accepted the gods of their pagan neighbors! Such is the fruit of mutual insult, substituted for solid argument and analysis.

The simple fact is that precious few of the conceptions of God or the gods entertained by human beings across time and cultures have been constructed with the help of St. Anselm’s Proslogion. And the very terms that Howsepián uses to press his case against the Latter-day Saints—terms such as God (related to Old High German got and Old Norse goth or guth) and theism and atheism (from ancient Greek theos)—referred in their original settings to beings such as Odin and Thor and Freya and Zeus and Apollo and Athena, who, by Howsepián’s rule, would not qualify as

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8 As will be demonstrated by a glance at such standard works as Geo Widengren, Religionsphänomenologie (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1969), 46–149; G. van der Leeuw, Phänomenologie der Religion, 4th ed. (Tübingen: Mohr, 1977), 3–207; and Walter Burkert, Greek Religion, trans. John Raffan (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985). Indeed, any collection of Greek, Roman, or Norse myths would serve the purpose.
“gods” or theoi at all. It is, for that matter, difficult to think of any term for deity to which Howsepian could resort that does not have its roots deep in polytheism and, thus, as he would apparently see it, in atheism. Take deity itself, for instance: It derives from Latin deus (“god”), and originally denoted such beings as Mars, Vulcan, Minerva, and Jupiter; related terms include divine and divinity. Howsepian could avail himself of the biblical term El or Elohim, but the first is also the name of the Canaanite father-god, while the second, a masculine plural, is used even in the scriptures themselves for false gods as well as for the biblical God. As a last refuge, of course, he might flee to Jehovah or Yahweh. But that name, too, was venerated among ancient pagan polytheists, in the Syria of the first and second millennia before Christ.9

In fact, although Howsepian devotes considerable energy to demonstrating (as he sees it) that Latter-day Saints, contrary to another strain of anti-Mormon propaganda, are not polytheists because they were never theists in the first place, it scarcely seems to have been necessary for him to go to all the trouble: I find it difficult if not impossible to see how any polytheism that has ever actually existed in the real human world could conceivably, given his odd urge to deicide, ever count with Howsepian as anything other than a more or less “sophisticated form of atheism.”10

More important, though, especially in view of recent works of

9 See Cyrus H. Gordon and Gary A. Rendsburg, The Bible and the Ancient Near East, 4th ed. (New York: Norton, 1997), 38 n. 11, 113, 250–51. One is reminded, in this context, of such anti-Mormon polemicists as Robert Morey and John Ankerberg and John Weldon, who, in the process elsewhere of attacking the faith of Islam—what an interesting career choice!—point to the pre-Islamic pagan associations of the title Allâh as evidence that the God Muslims worship is evil and demonic. See Robert Morey, The Islamic Invasion: Confronting the World’s Fastest Growing Religion (Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House, 1992), 57–65; and John Ankerberg and John Weldon, The Facts on Islam (Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House, 1991), 9–12, 14, 18, 24, 33, 40n, 42–43, 44. They evidently do not care that the word Allâh is closely related to the Hebrew word Elohim, that it is simply the Arabic equivalent of the English God—and is so used throughout the Arabic Bible—and that, in thus denouncing the Muslims as heathenish devil-worshipers, they also blithely condemn millions of their Arabic Christian brothers and sisters. More to the point here, they overlook the heathen origins of their own terms for God.

10 As, on p. 361 of his essay, he describes the faith of the Latter-day Saints.
biblical scholarship such as Mark Smith's *The Early History of God* and Margaret Barker's *The Great Angel*, but not limited to them, is the fact that the God described by the Bible writers themselves can be linked at best only very dubiously with the God of St. Anselm's definition.\(^{11}\)

Of course, it is possible that Howsepians simply does not realize how provincial is his view of the acceptable limits of the doctrine of God. As the evangelical scholar John Sanders points out,

> The view of God worked out in the early [post-apostolic] church, the "biblical-classical synthesis," has become so commonplace that even today most conservative [Protestant and Catholic] theologians simply assume that it is *the* correct scriptural concept of God and thus that any other alleged biblical understanding of God . . . must be rejected. The classical view is so taken for granted that it functions as a preunderstanding that rules out certain interpretations of Scripture that do not "fit" with the conception of what is "appropriate" for God to be like, as derived from Greek metaphysics.\(^{12}\)

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\(^{12}\) John Sanders, in Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger, *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 60. This important book is, in its entirety, a repudiation, from an evangelical Protestant point of view, of essential portions of the concept of deity held by such thinkers as St. Anselm and dogmatically insisted upon by A. A. Howsepians. Recent Latter-day Saint criticisms of the traditional notion of God include Richard R. Hopkins, *How Greek Philosophy Corrupted the Christian Concept of God* (Bountiful, Utah: Horizon, 1998) and David L. Paulsen, "The
One of the attributes central to ancient conceptions of God or the gods is that of deathlessness (although there are numerous cases where gods have died, one thinks of the Norse deity Balder, for example, or the Greek Pan, Mesopotamian Tammuz, or ancient Egyptian Osiris). Indeed, amusingly, when Latter-day Saint writers have attempted to defend our doctrine of eternal progression or human deification (known in Greek as theosis or theopoiesis), evangelical critics have frequently responded that the term theos—which shows up in the context of such a belief throughout the early church fathers—really connotes only immortality, not the entirety of the qualities associated with true divinity. But now, when the question at issue is whether or not the God(s) of the Latter-day Saints can be said to be truly divine, we find that “theism” requires acceptance of Anselmian ontology, and that nothing else will do.

But why—especially in view of the violence it does to our understanding of religious beliefs around the world and throughout history—should we accept Howsebian’s definition? William James was surely correct—certainly he was true to the historical and comparative data—when he pointed out, near the conclusion of his classic The Varieties of Religious Experience, that normal human religious needs and the felt impressions of ordinary religious life do not by any means require God or the gods to be all-powerful or even unique.13

Once we toss out Howsebian’s idiosyncratically restrictive definition of God, his arguments become to a large degree irrelevant. When he declares (on p. 363) that, “within the bounds of traditional Mormon metaphysics, neither the Heavenly Father, nor the Heavenly Mother, nor Jesus the Son, nor the Holy Ghost are (individually) ‘greatest possible beings,’” the informed response should be a shrug and a “So what?” When (on p. 364) he asks

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the question, “Is there anything at all in traditional Mormon ontology that qualifies for the office of Godhood?” and implicitly answers his own query by pointing out that “None is now, or ever can be, a greatest possible or infinite being,” he has answered the question for Anselmians, but not for non-Anselmians—though he claims, quite falsely, to be doing something universally compelling. His move here is not legitimate. It is rather like arguing that there can never be real points in a baseball game, because there is no way in baseball to score a touchdown.

Howsepian devotes considerable space (on pp. 363 and 366) to arguing—irrelevantly, I would contend—that Elohim cannot be a true Anselmian God because there must, in Mormon belief, be a God greater or more perfect than he. This is hardly earthshaking, of course, since Howsepian offers no evidence that any Latter-day Saint has ever argued that Elohim is the God of St. Anselm. Moreover, although it is obvious that, from a Latter-day Saint perspective, one God might be greater than another (e.g., having greater dominion, or, as John 14:28 seems to say of the Father in relation to the Son, being located higher on the patriarchal ladder), it is not at all obvious that one God can be more perfect than another.

Late in his article, Howsepian appears to realize that he has come thus far only on the basis of certain appalling leaps of logic and assumption. “One might justifiably charge,” he writes, “that I have, up to this point, been moving much too quickly. Why after all, is it not possible both to be a genuinely worship-worthy deity and, contra Anselmians, to lack certain omniproperties?” (p. 365; emphasis in the original). Why indeed? Most humans throughout the world and throughout history have certainly thought it possible. But, despite his tantalizing us with the prospect of his confronting a non-Anselmian alternative, Howsepian falls right back on Anselmian assumptions. He starts off promisingly enough, quoting Brian Leftow, who has argued that, as Howsepian summarizes his position (on p. 365), “x is divine if and only if x is worthy of worship. Furthermore, he avers, some sub-maximally powerful (or benevolent or knowledgeable) beings are, by Western theistic standards, worship-worthy and, therefore are, by these standards, divine.” With some modifications, I would accept Leftow’s principle here.
But suddenly we are back to Anselmianism—for Brian Leftow, too, we discover, is an Anselmian. It turns out that even Leftow’s limited God has to be the greatest thing or personage that its worshipers can conceive. But, says Howse, “Mormons can (and do) conceive of beings greater than Elohim” (p. 366; emphasis in the original). So, yet again, the God of Mormonism, because he is not the God defined by St. Anselm, is proclaimed by A. A. Howse to be no God at all. “Perhaps,” Howse writes, in what is either a remarkable display of disingenuousness or a sad confession of incompetence, “there is some manner of adequately construing deity which has escaped us and which can comfortably accommodate the so-called Gods of traditional Mormonism. But, frankly, I see no alternate way in which this would be possible” (p. 367).

“So,” says Howse, it seems that by the lights of both traditional and contemporary (monotheistic) Anselmianism, as well as by the lights of Leftow’s (polytheistic) Anselmianism, nothing countenanced by Mormon metaphysicians could possibly count as God. But then it appears that Mormons are not really theists after all. And if not theists and, in virtue of their total rejection of alternative theistic systems of religion, not mere non-theists, then it appears that Mormons are atheists (p. 367).

But this is silly. All Howse has really established is that Latter-day Saints neither believe in nor worship the kind of God defined in Anselm’s Proslogion. He has not come near to establishing—and I believe he can never hope to establish—that the Anselmian definition of God exhausts the possibilities. However, I sadly conclude, Howse uses the explosive charge of atheism against the Mormons because it is more conducive to his real aims than would be the much less eye-catching (but clearly more accurate) claim that Mormons are non-Anselmian theists. That he managed to publish such anti-Mormon propaganda in a journal as illustrious as Religious Studies is a matter for sorrowful reflection.

Howse discusses one other issue that has the potential both to offend Latter-day Saints and to give a delicious shock to their ever-eager critics. “It appears impossible,” he announces,
that there be faithful Mormons, for one would assume that faithful Mormons (like other persons of faith who consider themselves to be theists) are such that they would faithfully worship the Godhead; yet, even if one were to recognize the Gods of the Mormon Godhead as being genuine deities, it appears impossible for Mormons faithfully to worship their Godhead; therefore it appears that there can be no faithful Mormons. (p. 368; emphasis in the original)

Most Latter-day Saints encountering such a claim will, I am sure, find it preposterous on its face (as I do). Still, despite appearances, Howseopian is, here as elsewhere, making neither a moral judgment nor an empirical claim. His argument is entirely different. He mentions first in this connection (at p. 369 and note 33) the view that the God of the Latter-day Saints is not “worship-worthy” because, according to Mormon doctrine, the cosmos is not utterly and absolutely dependent upon that God in a metaphysical sense. The God of Mormonism is neither an emanating Neoplatonic deity, nor did he create the universe ex nihilo. Still, as with the issue of Mormon deception and duplicity, Howseopian leaves this claim hanging in the air. That is a dangerous place for him to leave it, though, since it is quite easy to shoot down. Neoplatonism, of course, is generally reckoned to have begun in the third century A.D. with Plotinus, or, perhaps, with his teacher Ammonius Saccas, who left no written record of his teaching behind. And according to the best scholarly authorities, the doctrine of ex nihilo creation too arose only in the second or third century after Christ.¹⁴ Thus, since both creation by emanation and creation out of nothing (ex nihilo) appear to be postbiblical theories, Howseopian’s claim that only a deity upon whom the existence of the entire cosmos metaphysically depends is “worship-worthy” would deny that the God of the Bible himself is worthy of worship. This is, of course, simply another instance of

the fact that acceptance of Howsepan's position would do grave
damage to normal ways of viewing religion and religious history.
It is very much like the collateral damage done, usually
unwittingly, when people accept definitions of the terms Christian
and cult that have been designed ad hoc by anti-Mormons to
exclude the Latter-day Saints from their clubhouse. Other groups
like the Catholics and the Orthodox end up being excluded as
well—which, for most people (though, sadly, not for all), is a
profundly weird result.15

What Howsepan more fundamentally argues (on pp. 369–70)
is that mortal Latter-day Saints are not exalted or deified now be-
cause they are—as sinful human beings—not perfectly faithful to
their God. This, of course, is incontestable. But he goes on to
maintain that, should they ever attain perfect faithfulness and the
deifying exaltation that is consequent upon it, they will thereupon,
as being themselves Gods, be released from their obligation to
worship the personage they had previously acknowledged as their
God, "since it is clearly a necessary truth that there can be no be-
ing B such that B is a proper object of worship for God... And
if this is the case, then the relationship between Mormons and the
Mormon Godhead is, in the ideal case scenario, a relationship that
is essentially marred by infidelity" (p. 369; emphasis in the
original).16

There are at least two fundamental problems with Howsepan's
argument on this issue, one philosophical and one factual. The
philosophical problem relates to his claim that "It is not possible
for there to exist an x such that God properly worships x" (p.
370). This does not seem at all obvious to me, unless—as
Howsepan always and everywhere does—one has in mind only an
Anselmian God, "than which no greater is possible."17 It is
"clearly a necessary truth" on Anselmian grounds, but not on

15 On this fascinating phenomenon, see Peterson and Ricks, Offenders for
a Word.
16 Note, again, the presentation of a Mormon "ideal" that no Mormon
would recognize or embrace.
17 By using the singular and capitalized term God here, Howsepan may,
in fact, be smuggling Anselmian assumptions into his argument, not by demon-
strative reasoning, by evidence and analysis, but by an implicit rhetorical ap-
pearance to the prejudices of his largely non-Mormon (and perhaps, indeed, classical
theist) audience.
Mormon ones. Howsepiain appears to have committed here the error of "begging the question," of sneaking into his premises the very conclusion that he seeks to establish. I have no difficulty conceiving of one exalted being "worshiping" another of higher rank, in the sense of the verb to worship that is given in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. There, the meanings include such perfectly appropriate notions as "honour or revere as a supernatural being or power, or as a holy thing; regard or approach with veneration," "regard with extreme respect or devotion; 'adore'," "honour; regard or treat with honour or respect," and so on. None of these actions or attitudes would be out of place in a celestial society of exalted beings.

The second problem with Howsepiain's claim about necessary infidelity in Mormon worship is the factual one. "Mormons," he informs his readers, "are taught that . . . they ought not remain worshipfully faithful to the Godhead for eternity. . . . Mormonism teaches that what were once proper objects of worship for S may, at some later time, no longer be." (p. 370). I know of no such statement from any Mormon scripture or Mormon leader. On the contrary, there are numerous statements of church leaders affirming that we will continue to be subject to God, our Father, in the same patriarchal order that makes us subservient to him now. And, in that case, worship would, as I have indicated, not be at all out of place even in the eternities.

The one truly interesting question raised by Howsepiain's paper concerns how Latter-day Saints would define or identify God among the many other beings in the universe. "There is," asserts Howsepiain,

. . . an ineliminable arbitrariness to what counts as something's being considered to be a God within a Mormon ontological framework. In Anselmian monotheism, there is no such arbitrariness involved in virtue of the fact that the Anselmian God is both *sui generis* and unsurpassably great. But in Mormonism, each member of a class of beings is considered to be divine *none* of which is either *sui generis* or unsurpassably great. The question then arises: What reason is there to think that only beings in *that* class are genuine deities
which deserve our worship? None that I can see. (p. 368; emphasis in the original)

This is a legitimate point of inquiry, although it is not, I am confident, one for which no cogent answer can be found. Howsebian himself, in an effort at reductio ad absurdum, proposes the rebellious followers of Lucifer and the elementary particles of physics as candidates for Mormon Godhood, on the basis of their necessary existence (on p. 367). But, of course, their necessary existence is not unique—all humans share it, for example (as Howsebian himself recognizes, on p. 367)—and no Latter-day Saint has ever proposed necessary existence as a sufficient criterion for Godhood. More seriously, Howsebian suggests (on p. 368) that a necessary criterion for Mormon Godhood might reside, for Latter-day Saints, in the genealogical relationship between exalted beings and mortal humans. This approach seems to me to have some promise. My own tentative answer to Howsebian’s question on this issue would probably involve something of genealogy, but would certainly go back to some of the points raised by his quotation from Brian Leftow (on p. 366) and in the brief discussion leading up to it.

Leftow offers a hypothetical account of a “minor deity” called Nod and his worshipers, the Passians:

Now perfect moral goodness is one attribute Western theists insist to be a member of S [the set of attributes that make something divine]. Nod is at least of an awe-inspiring power and knowledge, and awe is one key response involved in worship. Only Nod’s unending anguish, freely undertaken, spares the human race all manner of awfulness. Thus Passians are certainly rational in thinking themselves to owe Nod great thanks and praise. It is not clear on what basis one could deny these thanks and praise the title “worship”, particularly if the main attribute involved in their paeans is perfect goodness, and the rest of Nod’s relevant attributes are (as we have said) awe-inspiringly greater than any human can conceive, and Nod is thanked for salvific actions. The thanks and praise Passians address to Nod,
after all, are very much like those which Christians address to God.  

It would seem to me that moral perfection, coupled with awe-inspiring power and knowledge, would have to be components of what it means, in Mormonism, to be a God. And, it should be noted, such considerations put Latter-day Saints well above the cut-off line or minimum standard for the gods that humans have historically worshiped; many of them have lacked any pretense of moral perfection or even moral goodness. In this sense, my quasi-definition accords much better with the actual historical and cross-cultural data than does Howsepian’s.

In closing, I might add that I have always found Anselm’s proof too clever by half, and not at all convincing. I am, personally, much more interested in the greatest being that exists than in the greatest one of which I can conceive. It might be the case that a God who can make a four-cornered triangle could be considered greater than one who cannot, or that a God who can make 2 + 2 yield five is greater than one limited by the rules of logic and mathematics. But no such being seems to exist. It might be that a deity who created the universe out of nothing could be reckoned greater than a divinity who did not. But neither the Bible nor the Qur’ān nor modern scripture seems to know anything of such a being. Some (certainly including the ancient Greek philosopher Plato) might well consider a God who is completely intangible higher than an anthropomorphic divinity, but prophets ancient and modern report seeing the latter, not the former.

The irony here might be that, in conceiving a deity who is very great but who does not exist, as in attempting rhetorical deicide against the God proclaimed by prophets ancient and modern, it is A. A. Howsepian who, from a Latter-day Saint perspective, could be called an atheist. But it is impolite to point.

In this Review, we favor evidence and analysis over lexical games and mesmerism, and I think the present issue carries on the tradition. Kevin and Shauna Christensen offer interesting readings of the Book of Mormon, two reviews (by Richard Lloyd Anderson

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and Scott Faulring, and by Danel Bachman) carefully evaluate
Todd Compton’s controversial recent volume on the plural wives
of Joseph Smith. S. Kent Brown examines that rara avis, a sober
Latter-day Saint book about the Dead Sea Scrolls. John Tvedtnes
and Bruce Chadwick briefly notice a pair of recent books in which
major non-Mormon scholars, writing respectively on ancient sea-
farers and the spread of early Christianity, find it worthwhile to
pay attention to the Latter-day Saints. John Gee and John
Tvedtnes respond to two relatively sophisticated recent attempts to
undermine the claims of the gospel. I am grateful to these and the
other reviewers for their efforts, for the interesting fare they offer
to the readers of the Review.

My thanks go as well to those who have labored on this issue
of the Review, including Melvin J. Thorne, Sandra A. Thorne,
Mary Mahan, Wendy C. Thompson, Becky Isom, Robyn Patterson,
and Maria Ilieva. Shirley S. Ricks did remarkably
well, via the wonders of modern communications technology, preparing
the various files from her temporary residence in London. Meanwhile,
and on top of her own considerable responsibilities, Alison V. P.
Coutts—ironically, a displaced British subject working here in the
colonies—took over the process of preparing the Review for press
in Utah and managed it with her characteristic competence. As
always, I am delighted to take credit for the work they do.

Editor’s Picks

Concluding in traditional fashion, I now list certain texts or
items treated in the present issue of the Review and offer my own
(necessarily subjective) ratings. My opinions come, in some cases,
from personal and direct acquaintance with the materials in ques-
tion. In all cases, I have determined the rankings after reading the
reviews featured in this issue and after further conversations either
with the relevant reviewers or with those who assist in the editing
of the Review. The final judgments, however, and the final blame
for making them, are mine. This is how the rating system works:

**** Outstanding, a seminal work of the kind that appears
only rarely.

*** Enthusiastically recommended.

** Warmly recommended.
Recommended.

Here, then, are my ratings—at least, as of today; they could change tomorrow—for the items that we feel we can recommend from the present issue of the FARMS Review of Books:

* Lauramaery Gold, *Mormons on the Internet*

** Jeffrey R. Holland, *Christ and the New Covenant: The Messianic Message of the Book of Mormon*

** Donald W. Parry and Dana M. Pike, eds., *LDS Perspectives on the Dead Sea Scrolls*

** Raphael Patai, *The Children of Noah: Jewish Seafaring in Ancient Times*

** John W. Welch and Doris R. Dant, *The Book of Mormon Paintings of Minerva Teichert*


*** Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History*